

Republicans raise prison warning

Folsom tour starts campaign to highlight overcrowding.

By BRIAN JOSEPH
The Orange County Register

FOLSOM – Orange County Assemblyman Todd Spitzer announced Monday that he and other Assembly Republicans will tour seven of the state's 33 prisons over the next few weeks to draw attention to the prison overcrowding crisis.

Speaking just outside the gates of Folsom State Prison, Spitzer and Assembly Republican Leader Mike Villines accused legislative Democrats of minimizing and ignoring the problem and said their only recourse is to take the message to the people through a series of tours and press events.

"We are sick and tired of having our Democratic colleagues underestimate the dangerousness of the 4,000 inmates behind us," said Spitzer, of Orange, who is chairing the Assembly select committee on prison construction.

California's prison system is designed to hold roughly 100,000 inmates, but is housing more than 174,000, and the federal government is threatening to take over in June if the problem isn't addressed.

Democrats have proposed forming an independent commission to review who is being sent to prison and why. Republicans said the commission will recommend early release for inmates that residents would rather see locked up.

They also accused Democrats of ignoring the crisis so the federal courts will take the system over and order the early release of prisoners.

"Early release is no way to create prison space," said Villines, of Clovis.

Assembly Speaker Fabian Núñez, D-Los Angeles, later released a statement criticizing the Republicans for partisan posturing.

"I'm disappointed that there is fingerpointing instead of the constructive engagement the Legislature had with the governor and Republicans to produce a balanced budget and measures to reduce traffic congestion, build classrooms, and provide low-cost housing," he said.

"We've learned not to depend on the federal government to help with any of the challenges facing our state, and we're not about to let the federal government take over our corrections system."

Spitzer, Villines and 23 other Assembly Republicans toured Folsom State Prison.

While they were touring a cell block where inmates are kept two to a cell, a prisoner shouted out, "It might be two to a cell, but it was only designed for one person! It's an illegal cell!"